DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 167 917 CG 013 323

AUTHOR Luginbuhl, James; Frederick, Jeffrey T.
TITLE Experimental Research on Social Perceptions of Rape Victims: A Review and Critique.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (86th, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attribution Theory; *Crime; *Evaluation Methods; Females; *Perception; *Rape; *Research Methodology; Sex Differences; Social Attitudes

ABSTRACT

Experimental research on social perceptions of rape victims has been conducted within the framework of two different models. The first, a naive observer model, is oriented toward how the average person perceives a rape victim and how her character and aspects of her behavior affect these perceptions. The second, a jury process model, is directed toward how these same factors affect decisions reached by a jury in a rape trial. Results suggest that the attempt to follow both of these models in a single experiment, often a common practice, yields ambiguous results. (Author)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J Luginbuhl

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

Experimental Research on Social Perceptions of Rape Victims: A Review and Critique

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

James Luginbuhl and Jeffrey T. Frederick
North Carolina State University

ED167917

Abstract. The experimental research on social perceptions of rape victims is reviewed. It is suggested that much of the research is difficult to interpret due to a confusion between a naive observer model and a jury process model. This confusion should be avoided in the future.

In 1973 Jones and Aronson published a study which has generated considerable subsequent research. On the basis of the "just world theory" (e.g., Lerner & Simmons, 1966) they predicted and found that a respectable rape victim was attributed more fault for being raped than was an unrespectable rape victim. As a result not only of the counterintuitive nature of these results, but also as a function of greatly increasing awareness of the difficulties experienced by rape victims, many social psychologists undertook to explore more fully others' perceptions of rape victims. This paper will focus on experimental research dealing with social perceptions of rape victims and, while briefly reviewing the findings, will consist primarily of an evaluation of the research from a methodological perspective.

Review of the Research Findings

The paradigm used in virtually all of the research under discussion is simple. Different subjects are given different information about a rape victim after which they evaluate her (and sometimes the accused rapist) on a variety of attitudinal and attributional measures. Variables that have been manipulated include the victim's respectability (Feinman, Note 1; Feldman-Summers & Lindner, 1976; Fulero & Delara, 1976; Jones & Aronson, 1973; Kahn, Gilbert, Latta, Deutsch, Hagen, Hill, McGaughey, Ryen, & Wilson, 1977; Kanekar & Kolsawalla, 1977; Kerr & Kurtz, 1977; Luginbuhl & Mullin, Note 2; Smith, Keating, Hester, & Mitchell, 1976), the defendant's respectability (Frederick, Note 3; Frederick & Luginbuhl, Note 4; Kahn et al., 1977) the crime itself, e.g., attempted rape, rape, robbery (Feldman-Summers & Lindner, 1976; Fulero & Delara, 1976; Jones & Aronson, 1973; Kanekar & Kolsawalla, 1977; Kerr & Kurtz, 1977; Scroggs, 1976; Seligman, Brickman, & Koulack, 1977), degree of resistance by the victim (Feinman, Note 1; Scroggs, 1976), attractiveness of the victim (Feinman, Note 1; Seligman, Brickman, & Koulack, 1977; Thornton, 1977), prior acquaintance between the victim and the rapist (Calhoun, Selby, & Warring, 1976; Smith, Keating, Hester, & Mitchell, 1976), and sex of subject in the experiment (all studies).

Dependent measures have included various types of blame attributed to both the victim and the defendant, liking for the victim, perceived psychological damage to the victim, the penalty the rapist should receive were he to be convicted, and a variety of other measures many of which are found only in a single experiment. Many of the studies have paid particular attention to assessing the responsibility or blame ascribed to the victim since this was the aspect of Jones and Aronsons' study that generated the most interest.

Several results are relatively well-documented. The most consistent may be the lack of support for the just world prediction that the respectable victim will receive more blame than the unrespectable victim. Due to such consistent lack of support, we feel this prediction is no longer tenable. Fulero and Delara (1976) have suggested that

CG 013323

the subjects in the Jones and Aronson study may have felt more similar to the unrespectable victim (the divorcee) than to the respectable victim (a married woman/a virgin) and therefore defensively attributed less blame to the unrespectable victim. The respectable victim has often been viewed as a better person, more likeable, and as having experienced greater psychological trauma. However, in most studies the manipulation of respectability has been confounded with the victim's presumed sexual experience (e.g., the respectable victim is a virgin or a married woman; the unrespectable victim is a divorcee or a topless dancer). The cause of these differing social perceptions is thus unclear.

A second reasonably consistent set of findings concerns sex differences in responding to the rape victim. Males have generally, although not always, been less sympathetic toward the victim than females, attributing the victim with greater responsibility for the rape, seeing her as less adversely affected by the rape, and being more influenced than females bu such irrelevant factors as the victim's attractiveness, the extent to which she resisted, her respectability, and the respectability of the rapist. Females have generally been more likely to convict the rapist and to assign more severe penalties to the rapist than males.

Other results that are common to more than one study are (a) that rape is considered to be a more severe crime than is robbery or mugging; (b) rapists are given longer prison sentences than robbers or muggers; and (c) that the absolute level of responsibility attributed to rape victims is low while that attributed to the rapist is high, a finding not usually emphasized. Thus, we have experienced a modest gain in information as a result of the experimental research on perceptions of rape victims. There are, however, some interpretive difficulties with some of the findings, and these will now occupy our attention.

Methodological Issues

Frame-of-reference. One of the least standardized aspects of the research we have been describing is the overall context of the individual experiments, the "frame-of-reference" (Sherif, 1936), experienced by the subjects. Are the subjects to take the role of interested observers or of hypothetical jurors? Is it assumed that the rape took place or is the rape only alleged? Is there a defendant to consider, and must a decision as to his guilt or innocence and the entent of his punishment be made? These and other contextual differences make comparisons across experiments difficult and may also affect attributions to, and perceptions of the victim.

This lack of standardization may stem from the fact that the "purpose" of many of these studies is ambiguous. It appears that researchers have attempted to answer two separate questions, or have implicitly followed two separate and quite different models. These two models we will call the naive observer model and the jury process model. The naive observer model is concerned with how the average person perceives a rape victim and how her characteristics and aspects of her behavior affect these perceptions. The jury process model, on the other hand, asks how members of a jury will be affected by these same factors and how their resulting perceptions will be translated into a verdict.

The naive observer model, then, focuses simply on the ordinary perceptions of the average person, while the jury process model looks toward an important social and legal issue, the outcome of a rape trial. To anticipate future discussion, it is our contention that the indiscriminate combining of these two models in a single experiment results in ambiguous findings.

Each model suggests an "ideal" research strategy. For the naive observer model this strategy would involve most (probably all) of the

following: (a) the assumption that the rape took place (there would be no question of whether the victim was telling the truth), (b) no attempt to simulate a jury or any aspects of the court setting, (c) no decisions by subjects as to the guilt of the defendant (the defendant, the court process, and jury behavior are all irrelevant to the naive observer model), and (d) within this context the experimenter would manipulate characteristics of the victim, features of the rape situation (depending on the interests of the researcher), and would assess the resulting social perceptions of the subjects.

The ideal research strategy suggested by the jury process model is very different. It would involve (a) an attempt to simulate the court setting as much as possible, (b) selecting subjects as similar to real jurors as possible, (c) providing extensive testimony including witnesses, cross-examination, and instructions by the judge, (d) having the "jurors" decide on the guilt or innocence of the defendant by a process of (e) deliberation, and (f) within this context manipulating the same factors as in the naive observer model. The impact of these factors would be assessed, however, by comparing the verdicts reached in the different experimental conditions, not by an assessment of social perceptions. Thus, while the same variables can be studied within the framework of both models, they would be studied within very different contexts and would be assessed by different measurement techniques.

The significance of this distinction is that when these two models are combined in a single experiment, the experimental results are rendered ambiguous, especially those results dealing with social perceptions. This interpretive difficulty, which exists in much of the published research, stems from two sources. First, since researchers have conducted experiments in which both of these models are being followed, subjects have no doubt often been confused. For example, in some studies there has been no explicit attempt to simulate a jury situation, yet subjects have been asked to decide on the guilt or innocence of the defendant, sometimes <u>before</u> their social perceptions were assessed. Thus, even though they were not instructed to assume the role of jurors, they performed jury-related activity. In at least one published experiment, subjects were asked to assign some number of years punishment to the rapist, but only later were they asked to decide whether or not he was guilty. In still other experiments, subjects have been requested to assign punishment to the rapist without the question of his guilt or innocence ever being explicitly raised. (Are the subjects to simply assume he is guilty? Does their assignment of punishment represent a guilty verdict as well?) It seems likely, then, that subjects in many of the experiments were responding to ambiguous stimuli, leaving the meaning of their responses open to question.

The other reason why a combination of these models in the same experiment results in interpretive problems is that the stimuli which govern the perceptions of the subjects become unclear. If the subject determines whether or not the defendant is guilty <u>and</u> provides his or her social perceptions of the rape victim, which influences the other? Do subjects form certain perceptions of the victim which are then translated into a verdict? Or does the subject first determine in his or her own mind the fate of the defendant and then bring social perceptions of the victim into line with the decision as to guilt? If the subject rendered a harsh verdict for the defendant, would the victim be assimilated to this harsh judgment and evaluated harshly, or would she be contrasted and evaluated favorably? Similarly, if the social perceptions of the defendant were unfavorable, in what way would the perceptions of the victim be influenced?

Thus, if one's interest is in social perceptions, there should be an active attempt to avoid any simulation of a jury or jury processes lest the interpretation of these perceptions be left in doubt. If the interest is in jury processes, social perceptions could be assessed at the end of the experiment, after all other measures (including, of course, the verdict) had been obtained. These, in fact, could be compared with social perceptions obtained under the naive observer paradigm to detect any differences attributable to the two contexts. We expect there would be differences, although the foregoing discussion indicates that we are reluctant to predict what they might be.

The confusion in research goals (the simultaneous employment of the two models) stems, we feel, from laudable motivies on the part of researchers. The work of Jones and Aronson stimulated interest in the social perceptions of rape victims, but the practical significance of these perceptions (in terms of how a rape victim would be perceived by jurors and how these perceptions might affect the verdict) was so obvious that the social perception experiments were designed to be as "relevant" as possible. Thus, extra features were added (such as deciding on guilt and/or setting penalties) which confounded the interpretation of the social perceptions. Future researchers must decide which model they are pursuing and design their studies accordingly.

Dependent measures. We will comment briefly on a problem that is not unique to the experimental research on rape. This is the fact that a truly astonishing variety of dependent measures have been employed to measure the same general concept, the extent of the victim's responsibility for being raped. These include (a) how much the victim is at fault, (b) how much she is to blame, (c) how responsible she is for being raped, (d) how much her behavior precipitated the rape, (e) to what extent her character is to blame, and (f) the extent to which her behavior is to blame. This lack of standardization makes comparisons across experiments difficult. Furthermore, these diverse measures may tap different dimensions of the concept "responsibility." "How much is the victim to blame for being raped?" and "How responsible is the victim for being raped?" are two different questions. The former focuses more on the moral component, the latter more on an objective evaluation of the victim's potential contributory role. Thus, greater attention should be given to the choice of dependent measures, not only for the sake of interstudy comparability, but for the validity of the measures themselves.

Conclusions

The research on social perceptions of rape victims has yielded a few important findings, for example, the impact of extralegal factors in the perception of rape victims and also what appear to be fairly consistent sex differences in attributions to victims. Much of the research, however, has been marred by methodological problems. We have emphasized the diversity of dependent measures, and more importantly, a frequent confusion as to what model is being followed. We applaud these efforts to investigate an issue of great practical importance; this very importance necessitates careful and rigorous experimental design.

Reference Notes

1. Feinman, S. Fault attribution as a function of the actor's intentions and characteristics, and of sex of observer. Unpublished manuscript, 1976.
2. Luginbuhl, J., & Mullin, C. Rape and Responsibility: How and how much is the victim blamed? Unpublished manuscript, 1976.
3. Frederick, J. Jury selection: A psychologist examines jury behavior. Ohio Northern Law Review, In press.

4. Frederick, J., & Luginbuhl, J. The accused rapist: Influence of penalty options and respectability. Paper presented at the American Psychological Association Convention, Washington, D. C., 1976.

References

Calhoun, L. D., Selby, J. W., & Warring, L. J. Social perception of the victim's casual role in rape: An exploratory examination of four factors. Human Relations, 1976, 29, 517-526.

Feldman-Summers, S., & Lindner, K. Perceptions of victims and defendants in criminal assault cases. Criminal Justice and Behavior, 1976, 3, 135-150.

Fulero, S. M., & Delara, C. Rape victims and attributed responsibility: A defensive attribution approach. Victimology, 1976, 1, 551-563.

Jones, C., & Aronson, E. Attribution of fault to a rape victim as a function of respectability of the victim. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1973, 26, 415-419.

Kahn, A., Lucia, A., Gilbert, R., Latta, M., Deutsch, C., Hagen, R., Hill, M., McGaughey, T., Ryen, A. H., & Wilson, D. W. Attribution of fault to a rape victim as a function of respectability of the victim: A failure to replicate. Representative Research in Social Psychology, 1977, 8, 98-107.

Kanekar, S., & Kolsawalla, M. B. Responsibility in relation to respectability. Journal of Social Psychology, 1977, 102, 183-188.

Kerr, N. L., & Kurtz, S. T. Effects of a victim's suffering and respectability on mock juror judgments: Further evidence on the just world theory. Representative Research in Social Psychology, 1977, 8, 42-56.

Lerner, M. J., & Simmons, C. H. Observer's reaction to the "innocent victim": Compassion of rejection? Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1966, 4, 203-210.

Scroggs, J. R. Penalties for rape as a function of victim provocativeness, damage, and resistance. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 1976, 6, 360-368.

Seligman, C., Brickman, J., & Koulack, D. Rape and physical attractiveness: Assigning responsibility to victims. Journal of Personality, 1977, 45, 554-563.

Sherif, M. The Psychology of social norms. New York: Harper, 1936.

Smith, R. E., Keating, J. P., Hester, R. K., & Mitchell, H. E. Role and justice considerations in the attribution of responsibility to a rape victim. Journal of Research in Personality, 1976, 10, 346-357.

Thornton, B. Effect of rape victim's attractiveness in a jury simulation. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 1977, 3, 666-669.

Footnote

This paper is based on a presentation at the 1978 APA Convention in Toronto. This manuscript was completed while the first author was on leave at the University of Virginia, and the facilities provided by the Psychology Department are gratefully acknowledged. Reprints may be obtained by writing James Luginbuhl, Department of Psychology, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, N.C. 27650.